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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 001011

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: MULTIPLE ARRESTS AFTER HUNDREDS PROTEST ON OCTOBER
SQUARE

REF: A. MINSK 787
[1](#)B. STATE 164397
[1](#)C. MINSK 1006

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Nine activists have been sentenced to up to ten days in jail and opposition party leader Anatoliy Lebedko received minor injuries when security services cracked down after the conclusion of a successful protest against restrictions on small businesses December 10. The demonstration itself saw several hundred activists and entrepreneurs gather peacefully in Minsk's central square and obtain a promise from an MP to meet later in the month to discuss grievances. End summary.

Plainclothes Officers Nab Protestors after Demonstration

[1](#)2. (C) United Civic Party Chair Anatoliy Lebedko -- who had returned over the weekend from the opposition delegation's December 3-8 visit to Washington -- told Charge at the Embassy December 11 that seven plainclothes officers tried to abduct him and several other activists as they were walking to their cars after the demonstration. The officers refused to provide any identification and the activists resisted. At that point up to twenty additional plainclothes "spetsnaz" officers responded. Lebedko and others escaped but four activists were detained. Lebedko, sporting two bandages above his right eye, said his coat was ripped and he also injured a finger in the melee.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Nine activists (Boris Goretskiy, Kristina Shatikova, Aleksey Koshkarov, Viktor Gorbachev, Viktor Kryval, Viktor Kaley, Aleksandr Makayev and Aleksandr Tsetsura and Viktor Ivashkevich) face charges of organizing

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an unsanctioned rally and/or swearing in public. Several other activists were also detained, but released without being charged. Poloffs visited with supporters outside the two courthouses where trials took place December 11: as of this writing, Gorbachev has been sentenced to 15 days in jail for holding an unsanctioned demonstration, with Tsetsura was sentenced to 10 days and Makayev for seven days, both on the charge of minor hooliganism. We will provide further details on the demonstrators' sentences separately; some of them will be charged again with similar offenses.

Demonstration Itself Unhindered by Heavy Security Presence

¶4. (C) Several hundred people attended the unsanctioned demonstration on October Square to protest Presidential Decree 760, which would prevent individual entrepreneurs from employing anyone other than immediate relatives and from selling certain goods (ref A). United Civic Party Deputy Head Igor Shinkarik and lawyer Sergey Balykin told Poloffs the turnout was respectable. Lebedko was more positive, noting it was the largest protest on the center of October Square since 2006 demonstrations against Lukashenko's fraudulent re-election. Balykin noted that more vendors would have demonstrated if organizers had held the event at Bangalore Square, the remote venue authorized by the Minsk Executive Committee. Shinkarik complained of prior police actions to disrupt the event, including the arrests of at least four organizers (Aleksandr Tolstyko, Ruslan Lutsenko, Tsetsura and Makayev).

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¶5. (C) Lebedko said the ability of demonstrators to secure a promise from MP Anatol Pavlovich that officials would meet with entrepreneurs on December 19 to discuss complaints was a victory. He noted, however, that organizers would postpone any such talks until all those in detention were released.

¶6. (SBU) Scores of plainclothes officers mingled with protestors and Poloffs witnessed five paddy wagons and at least six busloads of uniformed officers stationed near October Square. At no point did the forces attempt to block access to the square, although a truck with loudspeakers blasted calls for the crowd to disperse, preventing most participants from hearing speeches by demonstration organizers.

Comment

¶7. (C) Previous sizable demonstrations involving

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entrepreneurs this year (ref A) took place with government authorization. The organizers' success in drawing hundreds of vendors to an unauthorized event may suggest growing willingness among small business owners to become involved in politics, something generally considered as too risky for anyone with a business registration to protect. Still, it is possible the crackdown after the events' conclusion will suffice to keep support for further such protests limited.

¶8. (C) In his meeting with Charge December 11, Lebedko was sanguine about his injuries; he reported that he has undergone a perfunctory examination by a friend who is a surgeon, and does not intend to press charges (largely because of the bureaucracy involved and the unlikelihood of actual judicial results). In contrast, the UCP leader was very upbeat about the meetings he and other opposition figures had in Washington last week (ref B) and was fairly optimistic about the role to be played by new Belarusian People's Front Chair Barshevskiy (ref C).

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